

THE SPIRIT OF PURIM

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BY
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CHARACTERS.

ESTHER

AHASUERUS

both masked:

TIME: Late evening—A Ball is in progress.

PLACE: A room off the Ball Room. Easy chairs and some palms are all that keep the place from looking bare. Of course, too, there are ornate walls and rich draperies. It is, apparently, an adjunct to the ball room of one of the big hotels.

CIRCUMSTANCES: Strains of a dance float in from the ball room, which is reached by a wide doorway at the left. This doorway is covered with a heavy blue drapery. The dance ends. One of the Merrymakers, representing Ahasuerus, enters and holds aside the curtain. Esther enters. Since they are masked, we cannot see their faces,—except mouth and chin. They are both in regal purple, and their costumes represent a modern idea of ancient royal garb. The woman is of medium height; and the soft round arms, the fine chin, the delicate mouth, and wonderful black hair, that falls down her back to her waist, all suggest that she is fair. The man is tall, and, next to that, the most prominent thing about him is his strong chin. For purposes of brevity, we shall call the man "the king." Esther is a short name, so let us continue to call him "the king." The man conducts the woman in the most courtly manner, and takes her to the door.

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The Spirit of Purim

ESTHER: Ha! Blessed intermission.

(A shout of laughter is heard from the crowd in the ballroom.)

THE KING: Why must Jews be noisy?

ESTHER: That remark brands you as a very young man. I suppose it was meant to be cynical.

THE KING: It was to be answered. And like a woman you have evaded it.

ESTHER: The answer was so apparent that I didn't think it necessary. You were referring to the particular group of Jews in the ball room. The Spirit of Purim is moving them. What do you expect when the Temple gives a Purim Masked Ball?

THE KING: Answered with a question. I was referring to Jews in general, however.

ESTHER: You don't like Jews?

THE KING: I'm a Jew myself.

ESTHER: I can scarcely believe it from the way you speak of them.

THE KING: Have I not the right to criticize mine own people?

ESTHER: The right, yes. But the right tone, no.

THE KING: You are playing with words.

ESTHER: No, I am dealing with an idea.

THE KING: And that is?

ESTHER: That it's too bad that Jews do not understand Jews.

THE KING: Or Jewesses.

ESTHER: No more than men understand women.

THE KING: You refer I believe?—

ESTHER: I hardly need to explain that.

THE KING: You refer to—

ESTHER: Why gossip?

THE KING: Let's be frank. You refer to our Rabbi and his wife.

ESTHER: You are clever, I see. You read my thoughts.

THE KING: I wish I could.

ESTHER: What good would it do?

THE KING: Then I would know the story of the Rabbi and his wife.

ESTHER: There's not much to know. It was an unfortunate marriage, I believe.

THE KING: Why did he marry her?

ESTHER: Perhaps for her looks. I've never seen anything else to her.

THE KING: How unfair women are to women.

ESTHER: I didn't mean to be unfair. Have you ever found anything more than looks to her?

THE KING: I'm afraid I don't know her very well. I'd rather reserve my opinion.

ESTHER: Afraid, I suppose, that I should carry it back to her.

THE KING: It would be favorable. Why should I be afraid?

ESTHER: Still not denying that I might repeat to her what you said.

THE KING: Without meaning to be rude, I believe we were not discussing you, but the Rabbi and his wife. You started to tell me their story.

ESTHER: And finished it when I told you that I thought their marriage an unhappy one.

THE KING: Why unhappy?

ESTHER: The Rabbi is a reform Jew. His wife comes from a very orthodox family. Need I say more?

THE KING: Yes. You've whetted my curiosity. Why should that make a difference?

ESTHER: It shouldn't, but it does. They both have different ideals.

THE KING: His are?

ESTHER: I'm not sure that I understand them. He wants to be as nearly like the Christians as possible.

THE KING: And she?

ESTHER: As nearly unlike them as possible.

THE KING: Surely they have something in common.

ESTHER: Very little, as far as I have been able to ascertain. Both say they are Jews.

THE KING: That's something to hold them together.

ESTHER: It depends on how truly they say it.

THE KING: You seem to doubt their word.

ESTHER: No, their judgment. People may delude themselves into believing they are things which they are not.

THE KING: Then they are both wrong? They are not Jews?

ESTHER: I didn't say that. She may be Jewish. But him I consider a Unitarian.

THE KING: Isn't a descendant of Jews, who believes in One God, a Jew?

ESTHER: He eats ham.

THE KING: And rides on Saturday, I suppose.

ESTHER: And preaches as much about Jesus as about Moses.

THE KING: And doesn't wear tzitsis, perhaps.

ESTHER: And worst of all, he sees very little glory in the Jewish past, and no hope in the future.

THE KING: Then why does he continue to be a Rabbi?

ESTHER: I've never been able to understand.

THE KING: Then lend me your woman's intuition while we try to figure it out.

ESTHER: You mean my ability to guess?

THE KING: Same thing. Let us begin.

ESTHER: This grows interesting.

THE KING: The Rabbi has a pleasant personality. Hasn't he?

ESTHER: They tell me he's a splendid fellow.

THE KING: Fairly well educated?

ESTHER: He has his M. A.

THE KING: He knows something of Judaism.

ESTHER: He ought to. He's a Seminary graduate, I believe.

THE KING: And a very honest man, I take it.

ESTHER: As far as I know, he is.

THE KING: Then why should he try to deceive the world?

ESTHER: Not the world? Himself.

THE KING: Doesn't he live according to his own lights.

ESTHER: Yes. But not according to those of his wife. If she's a Jew, then he is not.

THE KING: He treats her well.

ESTHER: He's a gentleman. What else could you expect?

THE KING: And still she is unhappy?

ESTHER: Yes.

THE KING: Simply because her husband does not stick to the old form?

ESTHER: In part.

THE KING: She must have known his habits before she married him.

ESTHER: His habits, yes. But not his ideas.

THE KING: Surely, she heard him preach.

ESTHER: Love may be deaf as well as blind.

THE KING: And marriage?

ESTHER: Opened her ears, as well as her eyes.

THE KING: And what did she hear and see?

ESTHER: She heard him talk of assimilation as a natural and desirable end.

THE KING: Couldn't she have misunderstand him?

ESTHER: His own wife?

THE KING: Wives do not always understand. In his sermons I've heard him preach assimilation for those who have drifted so far from Judaism that they could not be brought back. It seemed to me he preferred to see them Christians, with a God, than Atheists, without one.

ESTHER: You understood him so. But how many

took the other meaning, the ultimate assimilation of all Jews?

THE KING: He can't be blamed for those who did not want to hear him aright.

ESTHER: They heard him right when he said that the Jews are not a Nation and need no center in which to foster Jewish culture.

THE KING: Perhaps because he believes Judaism to be sufficient as a religion; that such a center would harm it as such in the eyes of the world.

ESTHER: He would let the glory of the past die.

THE KING: For the sake of the future.

ESTHER: What future can there be that does not live partly in the past.

THE KING: The past is dead.

ESTHER: So the Rabbi says. That's where he and his wife fail to agree. He is not consistent.

THE KING: In what respect?

ESTHER: He leads his congregation in such things as this Purim Ball. Yet he does not understand the Spirit of Purim; the Spirit of the Past that teaches and encourages the future.

THE KING: And if he did understand that spirit?

ESTHER: Then he and his wife might have some common ground on which to stand together.

THE KING: And if he didn't?

ESTHER: We're at the Purim Ball. This is no time to think of tragedy.

(Shouting and other noises from the Ball Room come to their ears.)

THE KING: Some more of the Spirit of Purim, I suppose.

ESTHER: You do not seem to understand that spirit, O Ahasuerus.

THE KING: I think I do, fair Esther.

ESTHER: How can you? Ahasuerus was no Jew.

THE KING: But he was the means of saving many Jews. Like your reform Rabbi.

ESTHER: And for the same reason, I presume. He believed that Haman had wronged him.

THE KING: I'm afraid I'm dense. I do not get your meaning.

ESTHER: It would lose its flavor in being explained. It might be well for you to figure it out.

THE KING: It's too much for my feeble brain. You see, I'm only a king, with councilors to do my thinking for me.

ESTHER: I'm sorry I can give you no help.

THE KING: Then I must continue to believe that Ahasuerus saved the Jews for the love of Esther and out of gratitude to Mordecai.

ESTHER: You will not be entirely wrong.

THE KING: And that your Rabbi worked to save Jews, who might otherwise have drifted away from Judaism, out of love for his race, and out of gratitude for his God.

ESTHER: You will not be entirely right.

THE KING: No one ever is.

ESTHER: But some are nearer right than others.

THE KING: The Rabbi's wife, for instance. She understands the Spirit of Purim.

ESTHER: It has helped her.

THE KING: May I know how?

ESTHER: It taught her how, for the sake of her people, Esther, a Jewess, lived with Ahasuerus, who was no Jew.

THE KING: I think I understand. I've often wondered about that myself.

ESTHER: The Spirit of Purim is not foreign to you then, if you can at least see what it is.

THE KING: I think I can. You've made it clearer to me. I thank you for that.

ESTHER: Then our chat has not been in vain. It's too bad that the Rabbi and his wife were not here to hear us. They might have profited, too.

THE KING: (*Rising, and slipping off his mask*)
Madam, I am the Rabbi.

ESTHER: (*Rising, also, and slipping off her mask*)
And I, sir, am the Rabbi's wife.

(*The orchestra in the ballroom starts to play a dance tune*).

THE KING: I believe we have the next dance together.

ESTHER: (*Taking his arm*) The blessed intermission is over.

(*They exit.*)

CURTAIN.

